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ABSTRACT

The paper examines special needs of low income families with handicapped children. The author asserts that parents must become acquainted with their rights under P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. The need of these families for advocates is underlined. Generalizations held by many people about low income families are examined: that poor people don't want anything and can accept any evaluation of children as accurate and final; that assessments can be made without the parents' input; that low income children cannot and do not want to learn; that low income parents don't want to become involved with the school and other agencies; and that nothing will help poor people. Ways in which educators and human service workers can help are summarized, including ensuring that educational programs are accountable and making the rights of handicapped children a community concern. (CL)

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF LOW INCOME FAMILIES WITH HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

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"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This article discusses the need for pupil personnel workers, educators, social and governmental agency workers and community organizations to take note that there is a large group of parents who may feel overwhelmed with the responsibilities of providing for the appropriate care, support and special needs of handicapped children and youth. It provides some specific needs of low income families and appeals to multi-disciplinary team efforts on the part of the school, church, and other institutions which provide outreach and support to families.

Particular attention is given to the many attitudes and belief which are erroneous about low income families. There are frequently attitudes which get in the way of appropriate delivery of educational, social, emotional and health services to families.

This article is presented as a response to the many school districts, church organizations and social agencies that have called for help.

The needs of low-income families with handicapped children and youth are tremendous. To this large group of people, having a child with special needs compounds the problems they face in finding adequate haousing, employment, health care, education and emotional support services. In the past, this group was completed ignored and few efforts or laws existed to protect them. If laws existed they were regarded lightly. With recent legislation at federal and state levels, the lives of some of this nation's poor have been ehnanced, but there is still a lack of support from all institutions. This has resulted in an ever widening gap among the poor and the affluent.

Considerable attention has been given to Public Law 94-142 and its meaning for the poor. This law provides for a free and appropriate education for all children, regardless of handicap. PL 94-142 is not and cannot address all the needs of low income families. There is some evidence that PL 94-142 and other mandates benefit those families who are more informed, better educated, more resourceful and those who preserve and insist that the laws protect their children and serve their well being.

There is a tendency to give less and overlook those who are uninformed and are not vocal in their demands. Low income parents are frequently a captive audience. They generally accept what they get and do not have the wherewithal to challenge an often limited amount of what should naturally be provided.

The purpose of this paper is to share some special needs of low income families of handicapped children. These suggestions do not call for the development of a proposal for funding to implement. It calls for a genuine

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commitment and dedication of partners, i. e., teachers, counselors, social workers, psychologists, attendance officers, administrators and community resources workers, to network and provide the special needs of this large population.

Perhaps, the primary need of low income families, as well as other families, is to become more aware of what their legal rights are and those of their children. School district, community agencies, state educational agencies, advocate groups, legal service groups, mental health organizations and community action programs need to work intrsuively together to assist in the overarching concern of providing for the total social, emotional and physical well being of all children and youth in the community. Organizations cannot expect to make a difference if they do not share in resources and communicate with each other in developing and implementing strategies for families.

As parents of children with special education needs various groups need to educate them to certain and all rights to ensure that the child receives the most appropriate education. Many parents are unaware of (1) the Due Process Procedures, (2) Protection in Evaluation Procedures, (3) Least Restrictive Environment and (4) Confidentiality of information.

Parents need to be aware of the specific rights and how to exercise these rights with respect to the education of their child. Particular areas of awareness and understanding should include the following:

- A free appropriate public education
- Provide consent for any changes in the educational program of the child
- To challenge the accuracy of information in the child's record
- To have their child educated in the least restrictive environment
- To question the appropriateness of their child's education
- Non-discriminatory assessment

As pupil personnel workers, educators, community organizations, we can assist low income families of handicapped children by being advocates for the child. Advocacy is an excellent role if it is kept to task and that primary task is being concerned and supportive of appropriate educational, health and social services. As advocates, individuals need to reach out to low income groups and include them in their efforts. There appear to be many groups who do not involve or are not concerned with the plight of the poor. This is a group of people who genuinely want the best for their children, but are often faced with trying to keep the lid on problems to prevent exploisions. Unlike affluent parents, they do not have the luxury of time to meet and share with other parents and groups on a daily basis. For any family having a handicapped member is a big responsibility. To low income families this become a greater responsibility and frequently exhacerbates already existing problems.

As advocates special attention needs to be given to assisting families to deal effectively with day-to-day problems. Advocates need to to be concerned about bringing families together in a sharing way so they can understand that there are many other people who face the problems of rearing a handicapped child. Through sharing, parents and family members can begin to develop ways to assist in the total growth of the child.

Low income families need a host of services within the community. The school, church, and community need to work together to identify ways they can outreach to families. In this effort, all resources need to know what services are available, what services are being provided and what specific services are needed.

We need to provide the best education for children who are from low income families. Placement in a special education class should not be a one-way ticket to being underclassed and cast away from the mainstream. Special education classes should not be utilized as a dumping ground for many children and youth who are borderline cases and cases that teachers and other supportive personnel do not want to serve.

Low income families need supportive services that provide and assist them in developing and maintaining good overall health. The needs of this group are more serve and more specialized.

We are able to understand the immediate and long range needs of low income families by identifying some gaps in the way society perceives, deals and relates to impoverished and low income families and their children. The following are some generalizations and attitudes which are held by many individuals who serve low income families.

1. <u>There is a pervasive attitude that poor people just don't want</u> anything.

Parents who are truly dedicated and committed are not just middleclass parents. Low income parents want the best for their children. There is a general feeling among low income families that they want their children to have a better social, emotional, economic and physical well being than their parents or themselves.

As support personnel and community services workers, we need to look closely at our attitudes and responses to individuals who are different in color, race, creed, background, socially and economically. From this introspection, we need to work on a program of modifying our behavior to accept, support and encourage all youth to achieve to their fullest potential.

2. <u>There is the feeling that poor people can accept any evaluation of children as being accurate and final.</u>

In our efforts to assist families, we need to be ethical, fair, honest, and thorough in the assessment of children. All parents want an honest, non-biased and comprehensive evaluation of their children. Low income families often place a lot of trust in the school and other institutions.

Some believe anything that the teacher does is fine. Historically, thousands of black and minority and poor children and youth have been assessed and placed in special education programs and classes on the primary basis of intelligence tests -- tests which do not accurately measure their learning ability. There is a critical need to provide and be commited to comprehensive evaluation or we, as educators, clinicians and administrators will continue to sentence thousands of children to poverty and more handicapping conditions.

As pupil personnel workers, we need to encourage and support the involvement of all individuals who can assist in the comprehensive assessment of the child. Comprehensive evaluations and or assessments must include the following:

- Language Development and Language Dominance Data
- Educational Assessment Data
- Sensory-Motor Assessment
- Adaptive Behavior Data
- Medical and/or Developmental Data
- Vocational Assessment Data
- Intellectual Assessment Data
- Parent Information
- Observational Data (At school and in the community)

3. <u>There is the feeling that assessments can be made without the parents' input</u>.

Parents frequently see more, hear more and know more about what makes Mary or James "tick." When parents are left out of the assessment process, a large part of the necessary information is missing. We have all too frequently made decisions on children and youth without the active participation of health personnel, social and welfare workers, community action personnel and others who know the child. Some school official feel that the involvement of this "host" of people will only make the educational assessment and planning conference too large.

4. <u>There is the feeling that low income children cannot and to not want to learn</u>.

This attitude promotes the self-fulfilling prophecy in education. All children can learn but they will never learn and succeed if we hold negative attitudes. Negative feelings on the part of educators and other workers have assisted in increasing the number of referrals for possible special education placement.

5. <u>There is the feeling that low income parents don't want to come to school and they don't keep appointments with the school and other agencies</u>.

No one ever thrives on going any place where he or she is not wanted or accepted: where they feel they are different and where they feel that their impoverished condition is reinforced and where they are made to feel that their poverty is the cause of their child's educational problems. We should attempt to make parents feel more welcome by being genuine, honest, supportive and respectful. Parents will continue to cancel appointments and refuse to go to the school if they feel that professionals are accommodating them.

Efforts should be made to help parents get to school to see about their child. Some parents who attend meetings should be used to help other parents in getting there. Parent groups are often more successful in helping parents be more responsible. Professionals can be helpful in reaching out to parents by meeting with parents in the home. This is often effective in helping professionals understand the many problems and responsibilities low income families must face and assume.

We need to make a special effort to invite parents to school when their child is doing well. Parents need to be assured that visits to school are not always crisis oriented. When parents are called to conferences where their child has been a problem, there is a natural response of being upset. We can assist parents in their attitudes about the school by identifying the problems and also suggesting some strategies to use in dealing with the problem.

6. <u>There is a feeling among some educators, social and health workers that no prevention or intervention is going to help poor people</u>.

Programs and services designed and implemented to help people must have good intent. There are many programs that were never planned for success. If we have good intent, dedication and patience, programs will work. People make programs and programs are people.

We can help low income families with handicapped children through:

- professionals sharing, communicating, and helping each other to attack the problems of families.
- parents being involved in the school
- developing parent education training programs on how they can reinforce their child's educational program at home
- ensuring that educational programs are accountable
- open communication with parents and community resources
- encouraging parents to send their children to school

- supporting the efforts to provide health and other supportive services to families
- making handicapped children's rights a community concern
- emphasizing the positives of families
- assisting in the preparation of children and youth for adulthood
- encouraging handicapped children to deal effectively with problems
- providing direction and follow-up in handling crises
- believing in the rights of all people, regardless of socio-economic level